

Trinity College Trinity College Digital Repository

The Trinity Papers

Trinity's Journals and Serial Publications

1-1-2013

Mary as Mother, Jesus as Mother: Affective Spirituality in Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love and Geoffrey Chaucer's Prioress' Tale

Elizabeth Preysner

Trinity College, elizabeth.preysner@trincoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinitypapers>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Preysner, Elizabeth, "Mary as Mother, Jesus as Mother: Affective Spirituality in Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love and Geoffrey Chaucer's Prioress' Tale". *The Trinity Papers* (2013).

Trinity College Digital Repository, Hartford, CT. <http://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/trinitypapers/23>

Mary as Mother, Jesus as Mother: Affective Spirituality in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Prioress' Tale*

Elizabeth L. Preysner

Religious beliefs are, to a certain degree, a matter of interpretation. Christianity holds that the words and commands of God are written in the Bible, yet the Christian understanding of God has changed through the centuries. This change is driven by historical context as well as tradition. During the late 14th century, writings on the physicality of God, Jesus, and Mary were prevalent, due to a shift emphasizing the relationship between the individual and God. Both Julian of Norwich and Geoffrey Chaucer were writing in this context, and their works demonstrate the varying manifestations of this affective tradition. Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* offers a complex interpretation of God's love, culminating in her assertions of Jesus as divine Mother. Chaucer's *Prioress' Tale* demonstrates the pitfalls of affective spirituality, and remains centered on the physical qualities of religious figures. Both Julian of Norwich and Chaucer's Prioress use the Virgin Mary's role as intercessor, within an affective spiritual tradition, to justify their basic arguments. While Julian uses Mary to establish a foundation for her later theological thought, Chaucer's Prioress lacks the mental capacity to move beyond physical identification with the Virgin.

Medieval conceptions of Christianity were changing between the 11th and 13th centuries, allowing for the development of 14th century affective spirituality. Instead of a focus on God's power and wrath, there was a new emphasis on Christ's love and the duty of all Christians to love one another (Bynum 22). While earlier medieval art and literature had been concerned with the idea of God as judge and king, 12th and 13th century writers and artists instead focused on His humanity. The focus of religion changed from an emphasis on powerful religious figures to the interior journey of the self towards God. As God's own humanity and His new loving relationship to humanity was established, Christian writing became increasingly emotional and sentimental towards God, Jesus, and Mary. This was, in part, a manifestation of the desire to literally imitate the life of Jesus on Earth (Bynum 16). Out of these changes in religious views came affective spirituality, or a way of thinking about Christianity that became highly emotionally charged. Affective spirituality included meditations on the life

of Christ, graphic depictions of His crucifixion, and imaginings of Christ's last words from the cross. In all these manifestations of affective spirituality, however, the reader was encouraged to *feel* what Christ was feeling; to relate to Him on an intimate and personal level (McNamer 1-2).

Most important for the writings of Julian of Norwich and Chaucer's Prioress, however, was the affective tradition that sought to emotionally identify with the Virgin Mary. The affective worship of Mary sought to elicit feeling as a result of Mary's maternal suffering and position as mother of God (McNamer 2). The affective worship of the Virgin Mary, however, was not confined exclusively to women. From the 12th century on, the Virgin Mary gained increased importance as an intercessor between the soul and Christ. As a result of her position as a human who gave birth to the divine, Mary was believed to be the queen of Heaven, in contact with the divine but still human (Bynum 136-7). Devotion to Mary was particularly prominent in male religious writing, and in one medieval text humanity was described as "curled up against her breast" (Bynum 137). While men were more often concerned with Mary's powerful position as the mother of God, women associated with her maternal relationship to Jesus (Bynum 18). The maternity of Mary, as well as her role as intercessor, is utilized by Julian of Norwich and Chaucer's Prioress in differing ways.

Julian of Norwich's Long Text of *Revelations of Divine Love* takes as its subject the explication and interpretation of Julian's mystical visions. Mysticism itself was a manifestation of affective spirituality, as it focused on the deep spiritual and emotional connection between God and the mystic. Julian's visions of the Virgin Mary serve as a transition into her deeper theological thought. After entering into her vision, Julian describes her first revelation, which concerns the Virgin Mary. In this way, Julian moves from the physical world to the world of the vision via the use of Mary. Symbolically, Mary becomes the temporary intercessor between God and Julian, mirroring her position as permanent intercessor for all of humanity. God came to Earth in the form of Jesus through Mary, and Julian comes to see God by first experiencing a vision of her. Julian's visionary experience can be translated into Mary's process of the birth of Jesus. Once Julian moves from her sickbed to her visions she states, "And in this sodenly all my paine was taken from me..." (7). The pain that Julian experienced reflects the pain of Mary in childbirth. Once Mary brought the Savior into the world her pain disappeared, just as Julian's does when she metaphorically gives birth to the vision. While Mary became a physical mother at the birth of Jesus, Julian becomes a spiritual mother at the genesis of her vision.

If Julian is going to portray herself as a spiritual mother akin to Mary in order to justify her interpretation of her vision, she needs to subtly identify with Marian qualities. It is not enough to simply appeal to Mary as an intercessor, the connection needs to go deeper. By introducing Mary into

her account early in her writing, Julian appeals to the “memory networks” of her readers (Hansen 198). Julian invokes Marian imagery in order to shape conceptions of Mary in a way that authorizes her text. In *Revelations of Divine Love*, this focuses on assertion of lowliness and unworthiness to be chosen by God for a special task. While Julian’s later theological interpretations do not portray her as lacking in the ability to interpret her visions, her association with the humility of Mary becomes a rhetorical strategy for Julian to establish a further connection with her. Julian says of Mary “...she sawe hyr selfe so lytylle and so lowe, so symple and so poer in regard of hyr God...” (12). The use of the word “symple” as a descriptive adjective for Mary takes on the connotation of “humility.” Mary considers herself low in comparison to the mighty power of God.

Julian cultivates this same type of humility when writing about herself at the beginning of her work, saying “This revelation was made to a symple creature...” (4). Given the complex theological interpretation that Julian will do later in her writings, her simplicity is a reflection of humility, not a lack of education. The assertion of humility is important for Julian, as authorial authority is a concern for her. Associations with Mary provide a safe way to segue into more complex arguments. This assertion of humility also serves to deflect any attention that Julian may get as an author back to God Himself. She is just a “symple creature,” not any type of powerful religious authority. Julian portrays Mary in the same way, for she is a vessel of God and without Him is not remarkable. If Mary is a vessel and intercessor between God and humanity, Julian constructs herself as a vessel and intercessor between her visions and God’s divine message.

Following in this women’s affective tradition of the maternal relationship between Jesus and His mother, Mary becomes a way for Julian to introduce maternal imagery and justify her role as “mother” to the visions. If Mary had to give birth and raise Jesus, Julian has to do much of the same with her visions. The “raising” of her visions, however, is the interpretations of them. Julian says, “In this [God] brought our Ladie Saint Mari to my understanding...Also God shewed me in part the wisdom and the truth of her sowle, wher in I understode the reverent beholding that she beheld her God...And this wisdom...made her say full meekely to Gabriell, ‘Loo me here, God’s handmaiden’” (8-9). Julian focuses on Mary’s internal strength and wisdom. Mary becomes God’s handmaiden not because she is physically worthy, but because she is spiritually capable. Becoming the mother of God is no easy task, but God saw Mary’s potential in her soul. God can see all souls, indicating that He has the ability to see Julian’s and recognize the potential in it. Although Julian will ultimately use her mind for the interpretation of her visions, her writing suggests that God has a different way of establishing who shall become His handmaiden. Julian may be a woman, but God has chosen her to share His message of love on Earth.

This passage demonstrates another key Marian similarity that Julian seeks to establish. Mary does not question the validity of her vision, but instead accepts it as truly from God. This serves as a justification for Julian, as it allows her to begin her interpretation without concern over the validity of her experience. When the angel greets her in the Bible, Mary "...was troubled at his saying, and thought with herself what manner of salutation this should be" (Luke 1:29). Mary, however, does not exhibit concern that an angel of the Lord had appeared before her. The validity of this visitation is not under consideration. Julian picks up on this idea in her text, through the idea of "reverent beholding." Mary's reverence for God was so steadfast that she did not doubt what was happening to her. Although Julian may doubt her interpretation of the visions, and maintain they are in accordance with church teachings, there is no doubt expressed in the Long Text as to the origin of these visions. Julian reinforces her confidence as to the nature of her visions through Mary's certainty.

Julian's first showing of Mary also reflects, to a certain degree, Julian's position as "mother" to her visions. While not bearing the physical child of God, she bears His mental child in the form of the interpretation of her vision. As a result of these visitations, Mary gave birth to the Word, but Julian gives birth to words. Julian portrays herself as a creator, a messenger from God to Earth. She positions herself fully in the world of the metaphorical, associating herself with Mary's role as creator and intercessor through their similar positions as mothers. Within the Long Text, "...imitative rhetorical strategies play a crucial part in the construction of narrative identity" (Hansen 188). Julian subtly weaves an association with Mary into her text, but does not make it the core of her identity. Once Mary has served her role as intercessor, Julian continues on to her larger theological points about the love of God.

At the end of her initial description of Mary, Julian juxtaposes her with Jesus in order to forward her ultimate goal of the revelation of God's divine love. This transitions the reader from consideration of Mary to reflection on God, signifying that Julian is moving beyond her associations with Mary and use of her position as intercessor. Julian states, "...I did understand verily that [Mary] is more than God made beneth her in wordiness and in fullhead... In this tyme...I saw that [our Lord] is to us all thing that is good and comfortable to our helpe. He is oure clothing that for love wrappeth us and wyndeth us, halseth us and all becloseth us, hangeth about us for tender love that he may never leewe us" (9). Mary may be the highest of humans, but God is still above her. Julian's writings, after all, are an account of her revelations of *divine* love, not the love of the saints. By associating herself with Mary, Julian connects herself with a human who becomes blessed by God, but does not claim direct association with God Himself (Hansen 201). Mary's maternal love pales next to God's eternal and divine love. God envelops humanity in

His loving embrace which can never falter. Julian's affective association with Mary, then, serves as part of a progression from human love to divine love.

Through this consideration of Mary's maternal love and role as an intercessor for humanity, then, Julian is able to introduce her theological construction of Jesus as Mother. Mary may be the human intercessor, but Jesus is the divine one. By coming to Earth in human form, suffering, and ultimately dying, He becomes the intercessor for humanity between salvation and damnation. To begin with this idea in *Revelations of Divine Love* would have been too abrupt, introducing fairly radical ideas into the text early without proper exposition. Since the story of God's life on Earth begins through Mary, it makes logical sense for Julian to begin there.

But Mary is not the final answer to salvation, Jesus is. His sacrifice allowed humanity to be birthed into new life through Him. Julian says, "Thus oure Lady is oure moder in whome we be all becloysd and of hyr borne in Crist. For she that is moder of oure Savyoure is mother of all that ben savyd in our Savyour" (90). Julian establishes a chain of maternal imagery here, linking motherhood to both Mary and Jesus. Mary's position as the mother of the Savior indicates that all are indebted to her for becoming the physical means through which Jesus came to Earth. In the Christian tradition, all believers are members of one body in Christ, indicating the unity of Christianity. If all Christians are one in Christ, and Christ was born through Mary, then all believers are symbolically born of her.

Although Mary may be the symbolic mother of all humanity, Julian does not limit maternal imagery to her exclusively. Mary's role can only take her so far in the religious hierarchy; she is the link between the human and divine, she is not God Himself. It is here that Julian moves to transcend the Marian imagery she has been using to establish a basis for her argument. Julian continues, "And oure Savyoure is oure very Moder in whome we be endlessly borne and nevyr shall come out of hym" (Baker 90). Nothing can separate a person from the love of Jesus. Once a person accepts Jesus, he or she is metaphorically born into new life through Him. Thus, Jesus becomes the ultimate Mother, the one who will never abandon His children. While physical mothers, including Mary, must give birth to their children after nine months, Christians are never expelled from God's "womb." His maternal love provides all the spiritual nourishment necessary for survival.

Julian's words are meant to provide the comfort of God's divine love to all readers. The maternal imagery she uses to describe Jesus associates Him with the gentleness and compassion that she had previously associated with Mary. Julian does not strive to equate Jesus with Mary, however, she seeks to demonstrate how far away even the tender love of Mary is from that of God. Julian elaborates further on her understanding of Jesus as Mother saying, "The moder's service is nerest, rediest, and suerest. Nerest for it is most of kind, rediest for it is most of love, and sekerest for it is most of trewth. This office

ne might nor coude nevyr none done to the full, but he allone" (94). Physical mothers remain bound to their children for their whole life. Julian describes this love as "nerest, rediest, and surest" because mothers are responsible for the physical birth and nourishment of their children. This leads to the creation of a special bond that is not present with fathers. Also, in the context of 14th century medieval society, fathers saw children as heirs or additional workers depending on social class. Children, then, were not to be loved but were to be looked at as investments. What Julian strives to do by associating Jesus with motherhood is to reassure her readers that He is a loving, caring God. All are treated equally in His sight and become heirs to His eternal kingdom. His love surpasses even that of a physical mother, as He is Mother to all.

As Julian's association of Jesus with divine motherhood continues, His surpassing of earthly motherhood becomes clearer. Mary fades in comparison, even to the point that her role as intercessor becomes irrelevant in light of this God of transcendent love. This could illustrate proto-Protestant ideas in Julian's text, as she advocates for direct, unmediated communication between Christians and God. Julian maintains, "We wytt that alle oure moders bere us to payne and to dyeng. A, what is that? But oure very Moder Jhesu, he alone beryth us to joye and to endlesse levyng, blessyd mot he be" (94). Even Mary could not save her child from death. Every human being must suffer during life and ultimately die, making mothers symbolically the entrance into a fallen world. Jesus is the Mother that balances out this pain and suffering. If physical mothers bring "payne" and "dyeng," the spiritual Mother brings "joye" and "levyng." Thus, Jesus offers the opposite of physical mothers, which Julian illustrates through the pairing of antonyms. What connects the two, however, is love. The love of physical mothers and the Virgin Mary, therefore, is a precursor to what humans will experience in Heaven with the divine Mother.

Julian of Norwich's incorporation of the Virgin Mary in her text provides the basis for her ultimate development of Jesus' maternal love. Chaucer's Prioress, however, lacks the complexity of thought to utilize the Virgin Mary in any such sophisticated way. Instead, Mary becomes a way for the Prioress to imitate the "courteise" of the courtly tradition by using Mary as an example of the epitome of the courtly lady. Mary, therefore, becomes the intercessor between the Prioress' true identity as a nun and the identity of a courtly lady and mother, which she desires. What the Prioress fails to understand, however, is that the qualities she admires in Mary transcend that of any courtly woman's.

Chaucer first attempts to demonstrate the Prioress' desire to imitate Mary through the courtly tradition by introducing her name. He says, "And she was cleped madame Eglentyne" (GP 121). The Prioress' name carries a variety of connotations, most obviously that of a courtly lover. "Eglentyne" means "briar rose," the name of a typical romance heroine (Fisher 12). The name, however, also has Marian undertones. *Chansons* of the 12th century stated, for example,

"Fresh rose, lily flower, blossom of eglantine, who praises thee, loves and serves thee wholeheartedly, has found indeed the path to heaven" (Frank 349). The eglentyne, therefore, like the lily, was considered a representation of Mary. It was "...a common symbol for the Virgin; indeed, its blossom's five petals were said to represent her Five Joys" (Frank 349). By calling herself Madame Eglentyne, the Prioress seeks to establish herself simultaneously in a courtly and religious world via the Marian and courtly connotations of her name. Through use of this name, she can come symbolically closer to the identities that she cannot have. The Prioress' name, therefore, reflects all that she cannot achieve in society. The closest she can come to courtly life is her name.

As the General Prologue continues, the Prioress seeks to emulate Mary's position by adopting the impeccable table manners and behaviors of the aristocracy. This demonstrates simplicity of thought on the part of the Prioress, for the Virgin Mary, as the mother of God, was positioned well above any courtly lady. In fact, in *Pearl*, a dream vision poem contemporaneous to *The Canterbury Tales*, for example, Mary is described as "þe Quen of Cortaysye" (38). Chaucer describes the Prioress' emphasis on courtesy, saying, "In courtesie was set ful muchel hir lest" (GP 132). The Prioress seems to think, in a convoluted way, that imitating Mary will make her a better prioress. Mary is the mother of God, and the Prioress is the spiritual mother of her convent. If she can imitate Mary through the courtly behavior of aristocratic ladies and become more like Mary, then she will become a better spiritual mother. In this imitation, Mary becomes intercessor between what the Prioress wants (the life of a courtly lady) and what she has (the life of a prioress).

Mary's "courtesie," however, is inspired by God; it is a divine "courtesie." The Prioress lacks the mental ability to make this distinction, and continues to represent the Virgin Mary through human courtly terms. Chaucer portrays a woman trapped in the physical representations of religion and unable to understand the spiritual element of it. Instead of striving to reach God through Mary, the Prioress attempts to closely emulate the supposed behavior of Mary on Earth. Chaucer illustrates this as a misplaced emotion, as the Prioress lacks the ability to transcend the physical and reveal God's divine love. She remains rooted in an emotional response to Mary, but does not transcend this into true spirituality. Through the Prioress' confused notions about Mary, Chaucer illustrates the dangers of ascribing human traits to venerated religious figures. While Julian of Norwich was able to use Mary's role as intercessor to eventually describe Jesus as a divine Mother, less sophisticated women religious like the Prioress lack this ability.

The Prioress' understanding of Christianity would have been important for the successful spiritual discipline of the nuns under her as the spiritual mother of a convent. She attempts to develop maternal feelings, but they are misplaced. Chaucer maintains that the Prioress "...wolde wepe, if that she saugh a mous/ Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde" (GP 143-5).

This is a manifestation of love, but a misplaced one. While medieval religious beliefs held that Mary knelt at the foot of the cross and wept over Jesus' crucifixion, the Prioress mourns the death of small rodents. She should be mourning the loss of human life, not just that of animals. Metaphorically, the Prioress' behavior contorts that of Mary's. Jesus was innocent when He died on the cross, and was betrayed by Judas, one of His disciples. He was whipped before finally being crucified. For the Prioress, the suffering and death of the innocent Jesus is translated to her tears over dead rodents. Her maternal feelings become displaced, and mice become her spiritual children. The Prioress fails to see the incorrect placement of her love as a result of her desire to imitate Mary for her own ends. Chaucer demonstrates that while the Prioress recognizes the power of maternal love, she cannot manifest it appropriately.

Chaucer continues to portray the misplaced maternal love of the Prioress, which extends to an outpouring of love for her dogs. His description of the Prioress continues "Of smale houndes hadde she that she fedde/ With rosted flesh, or milk and wastel breed/ But soore wepte she if oon of hm were deed/ Or if men smoot it with a yerde smerte" (GP 146-9). These dogs are fed better than medieval peasants. The care lavished on these animals and the distress of the Prioress if they are hurt or killed is another misapplication of maternal love. Chaucer clearly demonstrates that the Prioress is most upset if "men smoot" the dogs, portraying the Prioress as intercessor between men and dogs. To her, the best way to imitate Mary's position as intercessor between the human and the divine and to display maternal love is to take the side of the innocent. Unfortunately, these innocents happen to be dogs. While this defense of innocence is indeed a quality of both Marian and maternal love, it remains rooted in the physical for the Prioress. She cannot be a mother to humans, but instead identifies as mother to animals. Chaucer demonstrates that the Prioress' inability to see the misapplication of her maternal love is a result of her lack of education. Readers can clearly see the fallacies in the Prioress' imitation of Mary's maternal love, however, she cannot.

In many of Chaucer's descriptions, he inserts a more critical comment at the end of his catalogue portraits, akin to the "turn" evident at the end of Shakespeare's sonnets. He does this for the Prioress, clearly demonstrating her lack of understanding of Mary's role as a spiritual intercessor. In his final description of the Prioress, Chaucer states "And theron heng a brooch of gold ful sheene/ On which ther was first write a crowned A,/ And after *Amor vincit omnia*" (GP 159-62). Although the Prioress' jewelry is not particularly fitting to her position as a nun and more closely associates her with the courtly tradition, it is the phrase on her brooch that is most revealing. The Latin phrase *Amor vincit omnia*, or "Love conquers all," connects the Prioress to the position of Mary as the mother of God.

Although this phrase carries erotic undertones, the Prioress links it to Mary. Mary did not choose to become the physical mother of Jesus, she was chosen, and ravished, by God. Mary praises God in the Magnificat, saying "My soul doth magnify the Lord. And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid..." (Luke 1:46-8). Mary's love for God conquers any misgivings she may have about the child she is carrying. Becoming the mother of God did not come without struggles for Mary, her fiancée almost left her, and she was ostracized in Bethlehem, ultimately giving birth in a stable. While Mary's love for God helps her bear these struggles, God's love for Mary helps her to overcome them. Thus, it is the love shared between humans and God, sometimes aided by the intercession of Mary, that conquers all. The erotic undertones in the *Prioress' Tale* are a way, albeit misplaced, to demonstrate the intimacy of this love. Trapped in the identity of a nun, while desiring to be a courtly lady, Chaucer reveals through the Prioress a woman ill fit for the religious life who cannot move beyond the physicality of affective spirituality to truly contemplate the divine. Through the Prioress' portrait, Chaucer anticipates the themes of the worship for Mary and motherhood that concern the Prioress' tale.

Before the Prioress begins her tale, her prologue further reinforces her desire to invoke and imitate Mary. In the first stanza of the prologue she alludes to Mary's anointed position and connect it with physical, worldly motherhood. The Prioress states, "But by the mouth of children thy bountee/ Parfourned is, for on the brest soukyng/ Somtyme shewen they thyn heriynge" (PrP 457-9). This image fits in the general stereotypes of the female or mother as generative or nurturing as seen in medieval spiritual literature (Bynum 131). These ideas take on added meaning when applied to the Virgin Mary. Mary, as the epitome of mothers, embodies these qualities for the entire human race. Breastfed children who venerate Mary, therefore, receive sustenance from both their physical and spiritual mother. From her relative obsession with the Virgin Mary, it becomes apparent that the Prioress' tale will be concerned with her. Through her attempts to associate herself with Mary as exhibited in her portrait, her invocation of breastfeeding as a way to praise Mary, and the foreshadowing of the subject of her tale, Mary becomes the physical manifestation of the Prioress' desires. Unlike Julian of Norwich's ability to use Mary as a path to deeper theological thought, the Prioress remains fixated on the body.

As the prologue continues, the Prioress invokes the Holy Spirit upon herself, just as it was invoked by God for Mary's conception of Jesus. Her description of the conception of Jesus closely mirrors that of the Bible, except that the Prioress' version is more sexually charged. The Prioress continues, "That ravysedest down for the deitee,/ Thurgh thyn humblesse, the goost that in th'alighte" (PrP 469-70). In the Bible, the angel tells Mary "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the most High

shall overshadow thee. And therefore also the Holy which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Both passages emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' conception and the lowliness of Mary in relation to God. In the Bible the power of God "overshadows" Mary, while in the Prioress' prologue it occurs through Mary's "humblesse." There is a clear hierarchy set up between Mary and God in both works, portraying her as a human vessel through which Jesus will enter the world. Mary, therefore, becomes the ultimate servant of God, letting Him take control of her body and surrendering herself to His will. Through this she becomes the intercessor for the world, perpetually situated between humanity and God. This comes through clearly in the Prioress' description of the Annunciation; although the imagery Chaucer adds indicates that the Prioress' desires are more physical than spiritual.

The Prioress' Annunciation account is charged with sexual imagery that attempts to describe Christ's conception as a celebration of physical pleasure. Mary is "ravysedest" by the Holy Spirit, who "in th'alighte." The moment of Christ's conception becomes one of physical pleasure, or even more disturbingly, rape. Through this ravishing of the Virgin Mary, Christ joins with humanity which the Prioress describes as the conception of the Father's "sapience." She states, "Conceyved was the Fadres sapience" (PrP 472). This "sapience" is a symbol for Christ, who is metaphorically the Father's Wisdom, but it also parallels the Prioress' desire to have sexual relations and reproduce. In her twisted understanding of Mary, the divine Wisdom that Mary brings to into the world is altered into a desire for human intimacy. This reflects the Prioress' desire to be a courtly woman, loved by men. With this action forbidden to her, the Prioress' words become a way to simulate what she cannot have sexually. If Mary can be "ravysedest" by God, the Prioress will participate in that divine sexual pleasure by invoking it before her tale. Mary's "sapience" is Jesus, but the Prioress sees her own "sapience" as the story she will tell to praise Mary and motherhood. Ironically, however, the *Prioress' Tale* demonstrates that she lacks any type of "sapience."

Given the portrait of the Prioress established in her description in the General Prologue and the prologue to her tale, Chaucer builds the expectation for a story about the Virgin Mary's role as intercessor and mother of God as well as motherhood. This is exactly what the Prioress delivers. Her story is a tale of a young boy who is brutally killed by Jews for his dedication to the Virgin Mary. The dedication of the boy and his mother to the Virgin Mary is not surprising; however, the Prioress' vehement hatred for Jews is. After all her descriptions of Mary's meekness and gentleness, as well as the Prioress' own demonstrations of misguided piety, the diatribe against Jews seems out of place. What becomes evident, however, is that Chaucer's designation of the Prioress as the teller of this tale is fitting, given the portrayal of Mary as intercessor between God and humanity and medieval ideas about Jews.

Multiple gospel accounts maintain that Mary was present at the cross during Jesus' crucifixion. The Book of John states, "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus, his mother..." (19:25). Many affective spiritual writers positioned themselves at the foot of the cross with Mary, watching Jesus suffer. These images often became grotesque, closely detailing the suffering and bloodiness of Christ. By imagining themselves with Mary at the foot of the cross, however, these authors used Mary as an intercessor in the experience of Jesus. The Prioress, however, eschews this more common idea of reaching God through Mary and remains fixated on her alone. Chaucer portrays her as unable to take the next step, remaining limited by her adoration of Mary. Mary, in a sense, even replaces Jesus in the Prioress' mind as a symbol of the highest manifestation of maternal love. As Julian of Norwich demonstrates, however, Jesus' love is superior in all ways to that of Mary.

The Prioress' young protagonist is a dedicated devotee of the Virgin Mary, although he is a bit too young to truly understand what that means. This young child encapsulates the Prioress to a certain extent, as she adores the Virgin Mary but lacks the understanding to truly comprehend her role in the Christian religion. In response to learning that the *Alma redemptoris* is about Mary he says, "And is this song maked in reverence/ Of Christe mooder?... Now, certes, I wol do my diligence/ To konne it al er Cristemasse be went --/ Through that I for my prymer shal be shent,/ And shal be beten thries in an houre,/ I wol it konne Oure Lady for to honoure" (PT 537-43). It is the subject of the song, Christ's mother, which compels the protagonist to memorize it. He vows to take abuse and disregard his studies in order to honor her. The behavior of the protagonist portrays him as being completely dedicated to Mary. In addition, the boy's innocence associates him with the small dogs and the mice that bring the Prioress to tears. The boy, therefore, becomes an object of pity that needs the protective care of both his mothers – physical and divine.

While the Prioress identifies with the innocent son in her tale, she also identifies with his mother. The mother's plight at the death of her son positions her in a long line of mothers who lament piteously the deaths of their children. After her son's death his mother "...gooth, as she were half out of hir mynde,/ To every plae where she hath supposed/ By liklihede her litel child to fynde;/ And evere on Cristes mooder meeke and kynde/ She cride..." (PrT 594-8). Through the reflection of the mother on Mary, a chain of maternal imagery develops. Mary was not allowed intervention at the death of her Son; instead she had to watch Him die. The mother in the Prioress' tale prays to Mary to intercede to keep this horror from happening to her, but Mary cannot. When the boy is found dead at the hands of the Jews it further links the physical mother with the divine one, as both experienced the death of their son through injustice. In this way, the tale may fulfill a fantasy for the Prioress. If she could become a mother and lose her child, then, through her

convoluted mental process as described by Chaucer, she may believe that she could truly attain the emotional state of Mary.

The Prioress' tale, prologue, and portrait extolling and imitating Mary's divine maternal love are complicated by the extreme anti-Semitism in the tale. In the context of her era, the Prioress' anti-Semitism is more easily explained. Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, meaning that Chaucer's Prioress had probably never seen a Jew. As Trachtenberg states, "The only Jew whom the medieval Christian recognized was a figment of the imagination" (qtd. in Felsenstein 19). The Prioress, therefore, sees Jews only through the twisted lens of the medieval imagination.

This is made difficult, however, by the Prioress' understanding of the Jews through what she believes is a Marian perspective. In the Middle Ages, it was commonly held that Jews killed Jesus. In response to Pilate's question of what to do with Jesus the Jews are said to have responded, "...His blood be upon us and upon our children" (Matthew 27:25). Chaucer constructs the Prioress' anti-Semitism as a twisted manifestation of Mary's love. To the Prioress, Mary, as the mother of God, would have the greatest reason to hate the Jews for killing her Son. The Prioress, therefore, reflects this hatred in her tale as a misplaced way to imitate Mary. In the tale the Jews are blamed for the death of the boy and punished. The provost of the town "...with wilde hors dide hem drawe,/ And after that he heng hem by the lawe" (PrT 633-4). Through the *Prioress' Tale*, then, Chaucer has the Prioress manifest the anger she feels Mary should have felt as part of her affective worship of the mother of God. In her punishment of the Jews, the Prioress contorts Mary's role as intercessor and mother. Mary is intercessor between God and humanity for salvation, not damnation. The Prioress, however, sees the love of a mother for a child as encompassing hatred for those who harm the child. The idea that divine, maternal love could supersede this pettiness is beyond her understanding. The Jews may not have been put to death for the murder of Jesus, but the Prioress gets her revenge by punishing them within the tale. To her convoluted thinking, then, the Prioress has imitated Mary's role as intercessor by condemning the Jews.

If Julian of Norwich is the ideal of what women religious can achieve through affective reflections on Christianity, then Chaucer demonstrates through his portrayal of the Prioress how rarely this occurs. He does not blame the Prioress for her preoccupation with imitating the Virgin Mary, but demonstrates how a concept can be misused in the hands of those who are ill-fitted for the task. The Prioress, therefore, comes to represent the problems in medieval 14th century monastic life. When those who have dedicated themselves to the religious life are more concerned with emulating the behaviors of the laity, it indicates decay in the religious system. Chaucer, through the Prioress, may be calling for a reorganization and reform of the religious system. In the same era, however, female religious thinkers like

Julian of Norwich were proposing radical new conceptions of God's divine love for all Christians. Given the contrast demonstrated between the Prioress' conceptions of the Virgin Mary and Julian of Norwich's conceptions of her, the transforming power of true theological interpretation becomes clear. Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* is still read today as a devotional text, while Chaucer's Prioress remains famous for her anti-Semitism and abuses of the religious life. In this context, perhaps Julian's interpretations of her visions of God's maternal and divine love demonstrate something that Chaucer's Prioress uses as a motto, albeit without the sexual connotations: *Amor vincit omnia*.

WORKS CITED

- Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1982. Print.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. Ed. John Fisher and Mark Allen. Boston, MA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006. Print.
- The Douay-Rheims Bible*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Saint Benedict Press, 2009. Print.
- Felsenstein, Frank. "Jews and Devils: Anti-Semitic Stereotypes of Late Medieval and Renaissance England." *Journal of Literature and Theology* 4.1 (1990): 15-28. *Oxford Journals*. Web. 31 Oct. 2012.
- Frank, Hardy Long. "Chaucer's Prioress and the Blessed Virgin." *The Chaucer Review* 13.4 (1979): 346-362. *Jstor*. Web. 2 Dec. 2012.
- Hansen, Elissa. "Making a Place: *Imitatio Mariae* in Julian of Norwich's Self-Construction." *Reading Memory and Identity in the Texts of Medieval European Holy Women*. Ed. Margaret Cotter-Lynch and Brad Herzog. New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2012. Print.
- Julian of Norwich. *The Showings of Julian of Norwich*. Ed. Denise Baker. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005. Print.
- McNamer, Sarah. *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. Print.
- Pearl*. Ed. William Vantuono. Notre Dame, ID: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995. Print.